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HOW WE CROSSED THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS INTO BRITISH COLUMBIA.

BY VISCOUNT MILTON, F.R.G.S., AND W. B. CHEADLE, B.A., F.R.G.S.



WHEN the discovery of gold in British Columbia raised that colony into considerable importance, the idea of connecting it with Canada, by a road across the continent of America, which should pass through British territory, naturally suggested itself. The Americans had already succeeded in carrying a road and telegraph line across the Rocky Mountains into California, and thus proved the practicability of establishing communication through an immense tract of unsettled country. In 1860, Captain Palliser and Dr. Hector found several passes through the great barrier of the Rocky Mountains, which they represented as presenting no great obstacles to the formation of a road. But these lay far to the south of the great gold-fields of Cariboo, and were in somewhat dangerous proximity to the American frontier. Dr. Hector, indeed, attempted to cross the mountains further north, in order to reach the head waters of the Thompson River, but encountered forests so dense and encumbered, that he judged it impossible to proceed, and turned south to the more open country on the Columbia.

The Leather Pass, lying in about the same latitude as Cariboo, had formerly been used by the Hudson's Bay Company as a portage from the Athabasca River to the Fraser, but had long been abandoned, on account of the many casualties which occurred in the navigation of the latter river.

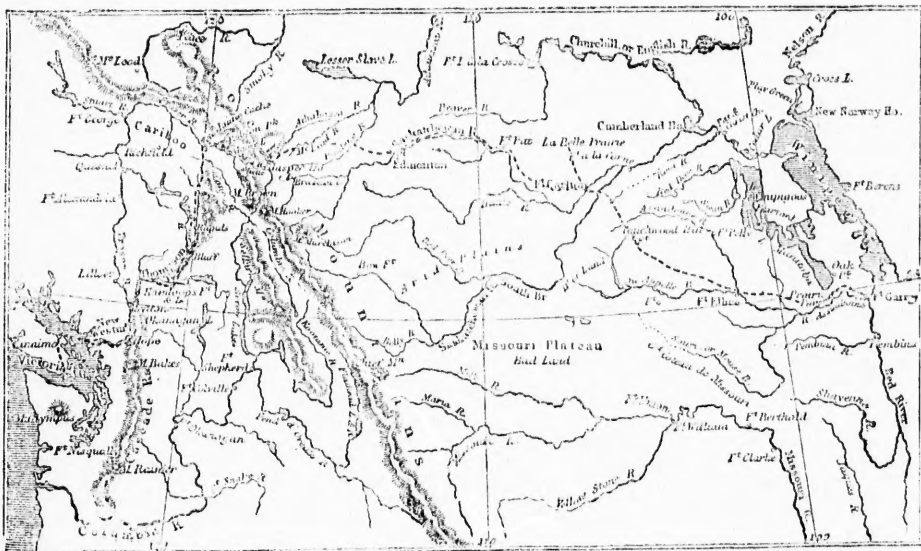
In the summer of 1862 we left England, determined to reach Cariboo, if possible, by the most direct route, taking the Leather Pass, and exploring the hitherto unknown region of the north branch of the Thompson River. We reached Fort Garry, in the Red River Settlement, on the 12th of

August, and there learned that a large band of emigrants, some 200 in all, and chiefly Canadians, had passed through in the preceding spring, on their way to British Columbia overland. Finding that the season was too far advanced to allow of our crossing the mountains before winter, we travelled on as far as Fort Carlton, on the north branch of the Saskatchewan, and turning almost due north for about seventy miles, built a rough log hut at a beautiful place called La Belle Prairie, and went into winter quarters. We spent our time in hunting and trapping, and served an apprenticeship in hardship and privation most useful to us in our subsequent difficulties. When the thaw set in at the beginning of April, we again started westward, along the North Saskatchewan by Fort Pitt, to Edmonton. This was the last place where we could obtain supplies or assistance until reaching some post in British Columbia, 600 or 700 miles distant; and here we made our final preparations for crossing the mountains. The people of the Fort informed us that the large band of emigrants had crossed by the Leather Pass, and on reaching Tête Jaune's Cache had divided, one portion descending the Fraser on rafts, the other striking south for the Thompson River. Another party of five had followed later in the summer, intending to descend the Fraser in canoes. Nothing was known of the ultimate fate of any of them.*

* During our stay in British Columbia afterwards, we met several of these adventurous pioneers, and learned the story of their travels. The party which descended the Fraser all arrived safely at Fort George, after many narrow escapes, and suffering considerable hardship. Those who followed the Thompson were obliged to abandon all their horses, sixty in number, and several men were drowned in the rapids. The third party of five, who descended the Fraser in canoes, suffered horribly. The canoes were swamped in some rapids; two of the party gained the shore, and the other three a rock in the middle of the stream. These were rescued after two days by their companions, but were so dreadfully frost-bitten and exhausted, that they were unable to proceed. Their comrades erected a rude shelter for them, cut a large supply of firewood, and leaving them their scanty remnant of provisions, set out on foot to obtain assistance at Fort George, which they expected

On the 3rd of June we left Edmonton, with a train of twelve horses, six of them packed with our baggage, pemmican, and flour. The only luxuries we took with us were tea, salt, and tobacco. Our party was, perhaps, as curious a collection as ever set out on an expedition as difficult, and even dangerous, as this was likely to prove. In addition to ourselves (two) were five others—viz., Baptiste Supernat, a French half-breed, who professed to know the country as far as Tête Jaune's Cache, whom we had engaged as head man and guide; another half-breed, commonly called "The Assiniboine," a man with only one hand, and a murderer—this last peculiarity we did not, however, know of at the time; his wife and son, the latter a boy of thirteen. We had been very, very unwilling to take the woman and boy, but "The Assiniboine" refused to accompany us on any other condition; and as we

bears; unable to sleep at night for fear the horses should trample on him, or Indians or wild beasts attack the camp. Afraid to touch a horse, and unable to handle an axe, his sole employment consisted in bemoaning the hardships of his position and prophesying greater evils for the future, comforting himself by the perusal of Paley's "Evidences of Christianity," which he failed not to study diligently three times every day of the three months our journey lasted. From Lake St. Ann's, fifty miles beyond Edmonton, to Jasper House, at the foot of the mountains, the forest is almost unbroken. The surface of the country is slightly undulating, and vast pine swamps fill up the shallow valleys. A day's journey in this region consists of floundering through bogs and swamps, and constant scrambling and plunging over the fallen timber, which lies strewn, crossed and interlaced,



were exceedingly anxious to secure the services of so accomplished a hunter and *voyageur*, we at length consented. There is little doubt that this eventually proved our salvation, and that "The Assiniboine" would have followed the example of Baptiste, who deserted, and left us to our fate, had he not been hampered with his family, and thus compelled to follow the provisions and our fortunes. And lastly, Mr. O'B—, a gentleman of considerable classical attainment, but of a marvellous timidity and helplessness; throughout the journey unhappy during the day from a continual fear of losing the way, or being devoured by grisly

to reach in six days. But they had miscalculated the distance; the way lay through dense, unencumbered forests, and the snows of winter set in before they arrived, almost dead, after twenty-one days' travelling. The Indians were sent out to seek those left behind, but returned unsuccessful, owing to the amount of snow which had fallen. Their remains were discovered in the spring, and there appears little doubt that one of these unfortunate men, maddened by hunger, had killed and eaten his two companions.

across the path and on every side. Having forded the Pembina River, we reached the McLeod on the 16th of June. Here our guide Baptiste deserted, carrying off with him our best horse and our only large axe. We, however, determined to proceed, and although "The Assiniboine" had never before set foot in this region, we trusted to his wonderful sagacity to find the road. Shortly afterwards we had a somewhat narrow escape of losing all our property, if not our lives. We had made a large fire for the benefit of the horses, while resting in the middle of the day, the smoke affording them some protection against the swarms of gad-flies and mosquitoes which tormented them. In struggling to supplant one another in the most favourable positions, they kicked some of the burning brands amongst the thickly-set pines, in the middle of which we were encamped, and in a moment the woods were on fire. By the greatest exertions we succeeded in preventing it from surrounding us.

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One horse was severely burnt, but no other damage occurred.

After striking the Athabasca river, we followed its right bank until arriving opposite Jasper House. We were now fairly in the Rocky Mountains, and high up a mountain side, whither the trail led us, we had one of the most magnificent views it was ever our fortune to behold. Hundreds of feet below rushed the torrent of the Athabasca, now swollen to its height, bearing along great pine-trees like straws in the powerful current; around us, on every side, huge snow-capped mountains towered up, with strange fantastic peaks; in the valley beneath, the little white building, surrounded by a perfect garden of wild flowers of the most brilliant and varied colours, edged along the mountain slopes by the brightest green. Crossing the Athabasca by raft, we now followed the Myette, which stream we were compelled to traverse no less than six times. Swollen like the Athabasca, the waters raged and boiled round the great rocks and boulders which beset its bed, and rushed over the shoulders of the horses as they stemmed the current; several of them lost their footing, and were borne far away down the stream. Mr. O'B—, having narrowly escaped disaster on two previous occasions, once when on horseback, and again when fording on foot, here crossed triumphantly, holding on with both hands to the flowing tail of the doctor's horse. Leaving the Myette, we came upon several small streams running to the west, and thus learned that we had unconsciously passed the height of land, and shortly after struck the Fraser, a little above its expansion into Moose Lake. Our course now lay along the right bank of this river, and the travelling at this point became exceedingly difficult and harassing. The river and lake had overflowed their banks up to the almost perpendicular mountain-sides of the valley. The trail was entirely under water, and for more than two days we were almost constantly wading, the horses being generally up to their girths, or floating about in deep water, to the great damage of flour and pemmican. At times accumulations of driftwood barred the passage along the shore, and we were compelled to scale the mountain-side; many of the horses slipped and rolled down into the water, when we had to unpack them and carry up their loads ourselves, to enable them to re-ascend. Two of the animals strayed over the bank into the stream, and were swept away in a moment. One was rescued by the intrepidity of "The Assiniboine," the other lost, and with him all our tea, salt, and tobacco, our instruments, spare clothes, and ammunition, except what we had on our persons at the time. We reached Tete Jaune's Cache, on the west side of the mountains, on the 14th of July; but, although we had crossed the main ridge, we were still surrounded by snow-clad mountains, which stretched away as far as the eye could reach in every direction. At this place we found two families of Shoshwap Indians; they, however, could give us little information about the country to the south or west, and were unable to furnish us with a guide. We now crossed the Fraser, and struck almost due south, following the emigrants' trail of the preceding summer. At the passage of the Canoe River, one of the tributaries of the Columbia, our raft was carried by the rapid current under a large pine which grew horizontally out of the bank, and closely overhung the water,

in which its lower branches were submerged. The raft was sucked under water, and its occupants brushed off like flies; but, fortunately, no lives were lost. The provisions were, however, considerably damaged by the water, and a portion of the baggage swept away.

In six days after leaving The Cache we came to the junction of the two main branches of the North Thompson. The trail now led up to the north-west branch in the direction of Cariboo, but quickly came to an end. The emigrants had been compelled to abandon the attempt to cut their way through to the Cariboo district; and we afterwards discovered their track following the main river to the south. This we pursued for two days, when it also came abruptly to an end in two large camps, in which were strewn pack-saddles and harness; and near at hand great trees cut down, with heaps of chips and splinters. We searched in every direction, but could find no track forward.

The truth, serious enough, was now forced upon us, that the emigrants, despairing of cutting their way through forests so dense and encumbered, had made large rafts, and thus descended the river to Kamloops. For us to follow their example seemed to be impossible. To make a proper raft, with our weakened forces and one small axe, would have occupied many days. We could not abandon our horses, which would probably be our only resource for food, for our provisions were now reduced to three days' rations. Nor were we competent to manage that most unmanageable of all transports, a large raft, on a river full of rocks and rapids, like the Thompson. We therefore decided to cut our way through the forest.

No one who has not seen a primeval forest, where trees of gigantic size have grown and fallen undisturbed for ages, can form any idea of the collection of timber, or the impenetrable character of such a region. The fallen trunks—green, or dead, and in every stage of decay—lay piled around, frequently forming barriers of six or seven feet high on every side. The ground in many parts was covered with a thick growth of American dogwood and aralea—the latter, a tough-stemmed trailer, often growing as high as the shoulders, and covered on the stem and leaves with sharp spines, which pierced through our clothes, and made the hands and legs of the pioneers scarlet with myriads of punctures. The horses met with continual disasters—miring in bogs, falling over rocks, or getting helplessly entangled amongst the fallen timber. We reduced our meals to two a-day, and those of the scantiest, eked out occasionally with partridges, skunks, squirrels, and martens. Day after day passed on, and there was no appearance of more open country, or any sign that man had ever before visited this dismal region. The obstructions continued as great as ever, and we had to keep chopping almost incessantly from morning till night, the woman taking her turn amongst the rest. On several occasions working hard all day, and not even resting at noon, we did not advance a single mile. We made an attempt to escape out of the narrow valley in which we were confined; but the mountain-sides were too steep, and the horses rolled down one after the other. On the 7th of August our provisions came entirely to an end; and on the 9th we killed one of the horses, and dried the meat. Although we used the strictest economy, this

supply lasted us only nine days. During this time the country before us showed no sign of improvement. We were still shut in by lofty mountains, and the forest stretched away as far as we could see. The horses became mere skeletons, having lived for weeks on nothing but twigs, or scanty patches of marsh grass and equisetum. "The Assiniboine" began to murmur loudly, declaring it useless to attempt to extricate ourselves, and Mr. O'B—— to lament his hard fate with increased earnestness.

On the 17th we rested in a dreary beaver swamp to kill another wretched animal, and the following day were inspirited by observing the marks of an axe upon some timber.

On the 21st we observed the tracks of horses, and the next day hit upon a faintly-marked trail, where the trees had been "blazed" a long time ago, and old marten-traps at intervals convinced us that we had at length struck the extreme end

of a trapping path from the fort. The valley began rapidly to expand, the hills became lower, and we fairly shouted for joy as we emerged from the gloom in which we had so long been imprisoned, on to a beautiful little prairie, and saw before us a more open and park-like country. The trail was now good, and we proceeded without much difficulty. Our supply of horse-flesh again came to an end; but, on the 23rd, we met with Indians—the first human beings we had encountered since leaving Tête Jaune's Cache, six weeks before. From them we obtained potatoes and berries, and one of their number guided us within a few miles of Fort Kamloops, which we reached on the 29th, three months after leaving Edmonton.

[NOTE.—The map which accompanies this article has been specially engraved for the purpose, and all the places alluded to in the text will be found marked. The route followed from Red River to Victoria is indicated by the dotted line.]

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